

Peter Tremewan, *French Akaroa: An Attempt to Colonise Southern New Zealand*. Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 1990. Pp. xx, 383, illus., maps, appendixes, bibliography, index. NZ\$29.95.

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"The story of Akaroa is the story of grand ambitions brought to nothing" (p. xvii). It is doubtful that French ambitions were in fact as grand as Peter Tremewan claims--their realization was too shambolic and frequently pathetic-- but brought to nothing they surely were, and quickly too. This minor episode in the colonization of the Pacific spans the handful of years from August 1838 (when the young French whaler Langlois purchased Banks Peninsula from only some of the local Maori for 1,000 francs) until April 1845 (when the last official link between Akaroa and the financially stricken Nanto-Bordelaise Company was broken). From this point, "the French settlers were on their own in a British colony" (p. 296).

French intentions to establish a settlement and eventually colonize New Zealand's South Island by means of a commercially based joint-venture (the Paris authorities operating through the French navy in conjunction with private business interests) were doomed from the outset. In classic fashion the French arrived too late: British Governor Hobson's declaration had extended British sovereignty over the South Island in May 1840, a matter of weeks before either of the two French ships--the *Aube*, under the lucidly pessimistic Lavaud, and the *Comte de Paris*, under Langlois-- had reached Akaroa. The French state's level of commitment had been reflected in the modest scale and mediocre quality of the venture: the original settlers--just fifty-nine of them--were mainly poor peasants and workers, desperate to flee grinding poverty in France rather than positively aspiring to a new life in New Zealand. In these circumstances and with these means at their disposal, French commercial and governmental objectives stood no chance. Indeed, the potential for disaster was considerable. In any event, France-British relations in the first half of the 1840s concerning Akaroa, and the South Island as a whole, were characterized by cordial if understandably cautious diplomacy and accommodation. Relations between French and Maori on Banks Peninsula were considerably less satisfactory; muddled agreements over land purchase (and repurchase . . .) were the rule rather than the exception.

The book's second half offers the classic account of a young colonial settlement: land distribution and clearing, building and communications, subsistence farming, missionary and scientific activity. Small achievements, many trials and tribulations: it was anything but a glorious imperial rampage. In the protracted initial stages the colonists were entirely dependent on the sponsoring Nanto-Bordelaise Company for

food, capital, equipment, many skills, and security. The fledgling Akaroa economy found itself persistently hampered by the absence of a significant market to which to direct the settlers' produce. By the end of the 1840s, what productive dynamism had developed had petered out.

Before the close of 1841, Paris had effectively recognized the priority of British claims to the whole of New Zealand, abandoned whatever aspirations it had entertained for a foothold in the country, and was looking with more determination towards the Marquesas—which, indeed, became French a matter of months later, in mid-1842. By the end of the following year, the French settlers in Akaroa had been outnumbered by the British. In demographic terms “French” Akaroa had survived a bare three years.

This study is a model of sound documentation; its reflection of original French sources is a particular strength. As befits its academic publishing origins, the volume is equipped to a high standard. Three appendixes list European and Maori populations of Akaroa in the 1840s and shipping movements there in 1841. The source notes and bibliography together run to just short of fifty pages. The index contains comprehensive, rather than exhaustive, coverage of names; a thematic index would have been welcome. The text is both agreeably and informatively illustrated, although some of the watercolors presented have paled on reproduction to indecipherable insignificance.

It is difficult to imagine anyone—however subregionally minded—wanting to know more about Akaroa's humble French beginnings. It might indeed be held that *French Akaroa* sins by providing excessive detail to the relative neglect of narrative flow and a broader interpretative perspective. Those who so argue would scarcely contest that Tremewan's monograph will long serve as the reference text on its subject.